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Asia's China Debate

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The Weight of the Past: East Asia's China Debate

JOHN H. MILLER

Executive Summary

- How might China's East Asian neighbors react to a bid by Beijing to reassert its historical dominance in the region?
- Each views China through a distinctive national prism based largely on its historical experience with China.
- The Japanese, accustomed to viewing their country as East Asia's pacesetter and model, would probably balk at subordination to China.
- The Koreans (North and South), conditioned to look to China as a mentor and protector, might find Chinese dominance acceptable.
- The Vietnamese, predisposed to emulate China but fiercely protective of their independence, would likely resist Chinese hegemony.
- The Thai and Burmese, both willing in the past to accept Chinese suzerainty, might again "bend with the wind" blowing from a strong China.
- The Malaysians and Indonesians, whose posture toward China is influenced by the legacy of the Chinese diaspora, would be wary.
- These predispositions are not determinative; other variables also shape the interaction of East Asian countries with China.
- None of these variables is more important than the influence of the United States, which remains the region's dominant power.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical patterns of interaction between nations admittedly provide an uncertain guide to their current and future relations. Nations, after all, change, as does the environment in which they act. Yet attitudes rooted in the past often live on or—just as importantly—are perceived to do so. A case in point is the widespread assumption that a strong China will inevitably seek to reprise the dominant role its imperial predecessor played in East Asia until the mid-nineteenth century. Whether or not this assumption accurately describes the intentions of Chinese leaders, it feeds the unease that China's rise during the 1990s has inspired in the region. China's neighbors do not, however, look at its putative quest for dominance in the same way. Each views China through a distinctive national prism based largely on historical experience. The images refracted through these prisms differ. China is seen variously—and sometimes simultaneously—as threatening and benign, partner and rival, protector and oppressor, and mentor and protégé. How did these images evolve? And how do they influence current attitudes toward China?

CHINA AT THE CENTER

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese Empire exercised unchallenged dominance over East Asia (here defined to include Southeast Asia). It dwarfed its neighbors in area and population. Its economy was the largest in the world and included a thriving commercial sector that produced luxury goods in demand regionally and globally. It boasted an ancient and sophisticated civilization based on Confucianism, a secular creed that idealized family relationships, social order, and benevolent government. Its Mandarin elite, recruited by competitive examinations, represented China's "best and brightest." Its centralized bureaucratic monarchy delivered remarkably efficient and honest government. At its apex stood the emperor, who claimed to rule not only China but also the entire world. This expansive claim was buttressed by both religious and secular sanctions. As the "Son of Heaven," he was a semi-divine mediator between the supernatural and natural realms. As a Confucian "sage king," he brought harmony and contentment to China and spread the blessings of the Confucian Way among the benighted "barbarians" beyond its borders.

Despite the emperor's claim to be a universal monarch, neither conquest nor proselytization appealed to China's rulers. They were inward looking and fundamentally isolationist. They viewed foreign relations as a matter of keeping the barbarians at bay and properly respectful. From the Chinese perspective, the most dangerous were the nomads in the west and north—the Mongols, Tibetans, Turks, and Manchus—who periodically combined to overrun or menace China. In the eighteenth century, they were pacified by force of arms and placed under Chinese supervision. No attempt was made, however, to Sinicize them. They were left to pursue their traditional way of life under their own rulers as long as the latter accepted the emperor's overlordship and guidance. This relationship was confirmed by the payment of ceremonial "tribute" to the emperor who in turn provided protection to subordinate rulers and authorized their right to govern on his behalf. The threat of force operated in the background: Chinese armies stood ready to punish or even depose unruly vassals.

Imperial China applied the same approach to the management of its relations with the states on its eastern and southern periphery, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and Nepal. Most accepted tributary status, since not to do so was to court danger. Although Beijing regarded these states as less threatening than the nomads and rarely interfered in their affairs, it was quite capable of launching punitive military strikes against them, and did so against Burma in the 1760s and Vietnam in the 1780s.

Beyond simply keeping on the good side of the Chinese colossus, other motives were in play. Korea and Vietnam looked to China as a cultural and political model and attempted to fashion themselves into “miniature Chinas.” Their kings welcomed investiture by the Chinese emperor as an indispensable prop of their domestic political legitimacy. The Koreans also saw China as a protector from the warlike and—from their point of view—less civilized Japanese, who had devastated their country in an invasion in the 1590s. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, regarded China as the chief threat to their independence. They remembered with bitterness and suspicion its thousand-year occupation and attempt to reconquer Vietnam in the fifteenth century.

The Burmese and Thai were not attracted to China’s Confucian civilization and did not consider its political system worthy of emulation. They drew their ideals from South Asian Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Their rulers regarded themselves as Buddhist “god-kings” and had no need of legitimization by China’s emperor. Their acceptance of his suzerainty was dictated by expediency. The maintenance of friendly relations with Beijing enabled them to focus on their political and military rivalry with each other and Vietnam for dominance over the smaller principalities between them. In addition, the tributary relationship and its ceremonial exchange of “gifts” provided a vehicle for lucrative official trade with China. The Islamic sultanates of peninsular and island Southeast Asia were also interested in trade with China, but this did not require them to enter into tributary relations and few did so. (One exception was the sultanate of Sulu in the southern Philippines.) The “junk trade” between the islands and south China, which was conducted by private Chinese merchants largely outside of Beijing’s purview, offered them adequate access to the Chinese market.

Alone among the major states of East Asia, Japan rejected Chinese overlordship. Its feudal military elite, the Samurai, considered this a national humiliation and an affront to the authority of their own emperor. Lacking naval power and mindful of Japan’s attempted conquest of China in the 1590s, Beijing was not disposed to try to bring it to heel by military force. The Japanese, in any case, posed little threat. Their policy of national seclusion, adopted in the early seventeenth century, dealt themselves out as political-military players in East Asia. But they embraced Confucianism, accepted China’s position as regional superpower, and admired it from afar as the fountainhead of their own civilization. They chafed, however, at the notion that their feudal system made them inferior to China. Intellectual movements arose that extolled Japan’s uniqueness and superiority. These contrasted the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties with the single, unbroken line of Japanese emperors who were descendants of the Sun Goddess, the divine progenitor of Japan and its people. The seeds of modern emperor-centered Japanese nationalism were thus sown in reaction to China.

CHINA IN ECLIPSE

Between the mid-nineteenth century and World War II, China faded from the center of East Asia. Its Mandarin elite, distracted by domestic rebellion and convinced of the superiority of China's Confucian civilization, proved incapable of fending off Western encroachments. Beginning with the Opium War of 1839–42, the imperial government suffered a series of humiliating military defeats that forced it to open the country on terms dictated by the West and abandon its claims of suzerainty over its neighbors. Vietnam was lost to the French in the Sino-French war of 1884–85. But the crowning disgrace was China's expulsion from Korea by Japan in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–95. The shock of this humiliation fatally discredited the imperial regime and pushed it toward collapse in 1911. The proclamation of a Western-style republic in 1912 did not end China's troubles. It fell into warlord anarchy that was only partially overcome by the establishment of a nationalist government in 1928 under Chiang Kai-shek. In addition to warlords, Chiang faced a communist insurgency led by Mao Zedong and renewed Japanese aggression.

China's travails were not unique. Except for Thailand and Japan, most East Asian states passed under Western colonial domination in the late nineteenth century. The British took over Burma, the Malay Peninsula, and north Borneo. The French seized Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The Dutch incorporated most of the Indonesian archipelago into the Netherlands East Indies. The Philippines passed from Spanish to American control. Thailand preserved its independence partly by deft diplomacy but mainly because of its position as a buffer between the British and French. The consolidation of Western rule over Southeast Asia eliminated any pretense of Beijing's suzerainty. Paradoxically, however, Chinese influence grew. Chinese immigrants streamed into the region, attracted by jobs in mines and plantations created by Western enterprise. Many of these "sojourners" stayed, particularly in British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies. There they moved into business and the professions, becoming an economic elite that aroused the envy and resentment of indigenous Malays.

The most striking development in East Asia during the era of European ascendancy was China's replacement by Japan as the region's dominant power. An isolated feudal backwater in the 1860s, Japan transformed itself within a generation into a Western-style nation-state with a powerful military and a rapidly growing industrial base. A key driver of this transformation was the precocious development of nationalism, which inspired the Japanese to embrace all-out Westernization in pursuit of national wealth and power. Since Japan's rise coincided with the heyday of Western imperialism and colonialism, it sought to join the imperialist "club" by acquiring a colonial empire of its own. Korea and China were inviting targets for empire building; they were nearby, weak, and offered valuable resources and markets. Japan's victory over China in 1895 enabled it to make Taiwan its first colonial possession. Its defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–5 gave it control over southern Manchuria and a free hand in Korea, which it annexed in 1910.

Japan's emergence as an imperial power brought it equality with the West but earned it the enmity of Chinese and Korean nationalists, who viewed Japan as the most dangerous of the imperialist predators. The Japanese themselves regarded

their success as proof of their superiority to Asians in general and Chinese in particular. Pan-Asianists, among them many right-wing nationalists, argued that Japan had a mission to liberate Asia from Western dominance and to spread the blessings of its superior civilization. Through the 1920s, however, Japanese political leaders remained committed to cooperation with the Western powers, particularly the United States and Britain. After the First World War, the latter retreated from old-fashioned imperialism in favor of cooperative approaches to maintain international order. In East Asia, this meant freezing the colonial status quo; limiting naval armaments; replacing alliances with multilateral consultative arrangements; and respecting China's territorial and administrative integrity. Japan went along, as did China's weak central government. The new dispensation was codified in the Washington Treaty system of 1921–22.

The Washington Treaty system collapsed in the 1930s as Japan abandoned cooperation with the West and embarked on a new round of empire building that was rationalized by the Pan-Asianism it had earlier shied away from. The precipitants of this about-face were the Great Depression, which devastated Japan's economy, and the Chinese nationalist challenge to its position in Manchuria. These events discredited pro-Western liberals and gave the initiative to military ultra-nationalists whose agenda included turning East Asia into a Japanese-dominated bloc. Their first move was the conversion of Manchuria into the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932–33. Emboldened by their success, they launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937. This, however, became an unwinnable war of attrition as Chiang and Mao joined forces to resist—at enormous human cost to the Chinese people. Japan's leaders upped the ante in 1940–41 by allying with Nazi Germany and preparing to absorb colonial Southeast Asia into a Japanese-run “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.” This brought them into confrontation with the United States, which imposed a crippling oil embargo on Japan in August 1941, triggering the Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor in December.

CHINA REEMERGES

The 1941–45 Pacific War had revolutionary effects in East Asia. One of these was the destruction of Imperial Japan and its replacement by the United States as the dominant regional power. Japanese leaders realized that they were unlikely to defeat the United States, whose economy was ten times larger than Japan's. Tokyo's only hope was to force Washington to accept its conquests as a *fait accompli*. But this hope faded as the tide of battle turned against Japan in 1943–44 and surrender or annihilation became its only options. The Japanese did, however, achieve their announced war aim of “liberating” Asia, although not in the way they anticipated. Their blitzkrieg victories in Southeast Asia in 1942 shattered the myth of European omnipotence. This, coupled with their patronage of Asian nationalists, gave a huge boost to Asian nationalism, making the postwar reconstruction of the colonial order impossible, and ensuring that a host of independent nation-states would arise from its ruins.

The Pacific War also cleared the way for China's reemergence as a major power. This began during the war when, at American insistence, Chiang Kai-shek was made one of the “Big Four” and given a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. However, Washington's hopes that Chiang's China

would become its principal Asian ally after the war were disappointed. The Chinese civil war was not over, and the Japanese invasion gave the advantage to the communists. Chiang's regime, driven from the richest parts of China, was plagued by corruption, incompetence and—after American intervention made Japan's defeat inevitable—complacency. Mao, on the other hand, grew stronger. His united front and peasant-based guerrilla tactics enabled him to attract broad support and wrap himself in the mantle of Chinese nationalism. Despite American mediation efforts, a postwar showdown was inevitable. When it came in 1946–49, Mao's forces easily defeated Chiang's overconfident and ill-led armies, and Chiang fled to Taiwan like other vanquished contenders for power in times past.

From Washington's perspective, the key question posed by Mao's victory was where his People's Republic of China (PRC) would figure in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry. This question was answered in 1950 when Mao allied the PRC with Moscow, joined Stalin in underwriting communist North Korea's attack on South Korea, and committed Chinese "volunteers" to roll back the U.S.-led counteroffensive on the Korean Peninsula. Concluding that it faced a Sino-Soviet conspiracy to communize East Asia by subversion or force of arms, the United States elected to "contain" China. It attempted to isolate Beijing diplomatically and economically. It deployed large military and naval forces in the region. And it set up a network of military alliances with anti-communist states, including South Korea and Chiang's Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. Japan was the linchpin. Although it was unwilling to "remilitarize" or participate in collective security arrangements, its reviving industrial economy was counted on to promote the growth and stability of non-communist Asia.

Southeast Asia was the weak link in the containment line and became the cockpit of Sino-American rivalry. PRC-backed Vietnamese communists ousted the French in 1954, set up a northern state, and threatened the non-communist south. Thailand and the Philippines aligned themselves with the United States, but both were beset by communist insurgencies. So, too, were Burma and Malaysia, and pro-PRC communists were major players in Indonesia's chaotic politics. Adding to the volatility were the uncertain loyalties of overseas Chinese and the neutralist proclivities of national leaders like Indonesia's Sukarno. Fishing for allies in Southeast Asia's troubled political waters was risky. A projected "Beijing-Hanoi-Jakarta alliance" came a cropper in 1965–66 with the massacre of Indonesian communists (and ethnic Chinese) and the installation of an anti-PRC military regime in Jakarta. The United States suffered an even more spectacular defeat in Vietnam where its attempt to create an anti-communist state in the south foundered on the communists' success in co-opting Vietnamese nationalism and resisting—with Soviet and Chinese aid—massive American military intervention.

The American debacle in Vietnam and the escalation of the long-simmering Sino-Soviet feud in the late 1960s led Washington and Beijing to conclude that they shared a common interest in checking Soviet "hegemonism" and curbing their own rivalry. The resulting Sino-American rapprochement of 1971–72 ended the Cold War as far as the United States and China were concerned. The American alliance system and forward deployed forces remained in place, but they were now focused against the Soviet threat. Containment gave way to cooperation in U.S. policy toward China. With Washington's acquiescence, the PRC took the

ROC's seat on the UN Security Council, and the ROC was expelled from the UN itself. Chiang's regime suffered the additional indignity of being "derecognized" by the United States and its allies, although it continued to receive American military assistance. The original strategic rationale of the U.S.-PRC reconciliation acquired new underpinnings after 1978 when Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, launched an economic modernization drive and opened China to Western trade and investment.

The attenuation of Sino-American rivalry in Southeast Asia was accompanied by significant realignments and policy shifts. The removal of the common American enemy brought to the surface latent Sino-Vietnamese tensions, which manifested themselves in rivalry over Cambodia and led to the PRC's 1979 punitive expedition against its former communist comrade-in-arms and protégé. Thailand, hitherto an American-backed anti-PRC frontline state, joined China in blocking Vietnamese expansion and drew its Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partners into this endeavor. Beijing, for its part, courted the ASEAN states, phasing out its earlier support of communist revolutionaries and dangling attractive trade deals. Despite wariness toward China on the part of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, all eventually normalized their relations with China. Burma was largely unaffected by these developments. Its xenophobic military regime sought to limit outside contacts and involvements. The only country of much importance to Rangoon was China, toward which it maintained a consistently deferential posture that reflected Burmese appreciation of Chinese military power.

North Korea remained in an early Cold War time warp. It played off Beijing against Moscow to sustain their support of its anachronistic Stalinist regime, faltering command economy, and unremitting hostility toward the United States. Japan and South Korea, however, crossed Cold War lines to embrace China. Tokyo, never happy with Washington's earlier insistence that it distance itself from the PRC, tried to build a "special relationship" with it based on economic complementarity and cultural affinities. But this relationship was shallow. Despite China's need of Japanese capital and technology, few Chinese were disposed to forgive and forget Japan's historical aggression, and many resented what they perceived to be its attitude of superiority as "Asia's new giant." South Korea's courtship, undertaken to weaken its North Korean rival, was more warmly received. Although Beijing was constrained by its ties with Pyongyang, neither it nor Seoul was troubled by the legacy of the Korean War in which China sustained 900,000 casualties and South Korea 300,000. Common suspicion and resentment of Japan lubricated their newfound cordiality.

CONCLUSIONS

Among the conclusions that can be drawn from the preceding review is the likelihood that Japan will contest any attempt by China to reassert its onetime regional dominance. As noted above, pre-modern Japan refused to accept subordination to Imperial China. Since the late nineteenth century, the Japanese have regarded their country as superior to China and the "natural" model for Asia. Japan's postwar rebirth as a democratic and pacifist economic superpower has

revived these attitudes, albeit shorn of their prewar chauvinism. Koreans, on the other hand, may be more comfortable with the notion of a resurgent Chinese “Middle Kingdom.” Historically, Korea looked to China as a mentor and protector. Given Koreans’ resentment of the humiliations inflicted on them by Imperial Japan, and their envy and distrust of postwar Japan, it is unsurprising that this traditional view of China should enjoy renewed appeal. Vietnam’s more wary attitude toward China is rooted in its pre-modern image of Imperial China as both a model and threat. This ambivalence has carried over into modern Vietnamese nationalism and helps explain Vietnamese emulation of Mao’s peasant-based guerrilla tactics in their struggle against the French and Americans, as well as their subsequent falling out with Beijing. Modern Burma, bereft of allies and beset by ethnic rebels, has perforce adopted an accommodative stance toward China reminiscent of its old tributary relationship. Thailand’s more supple diplomacy—its forte since the mid-nineteenth century—enables it to balance China with its ties to the United States and ASEAN. The dual legacies of the colonial-era Chinese diaspora and the PRC’s early Cold War encouragement of communist revolutionaries weigh on the relations of Indonesia and Malaysia with China. Malay antagonism toward ethnic Chinese simmers below the surface, creating the potential for anti-Chinese disturbances of the sort witnessed in Indonesia in 1998.

It bears reemphasizing that history is not determinative—historically rooted predispositions are only one of many variables that shape the behavior of nations and governments. In East Asia, none of these variables is more important than the influence of the United States, the region’s dominant power since it defeated Japan in the Pacific War. Whatever their inclinations to resist or accommodate China, every East Asian state has to take into account American wishes and priorities. The United States does not, of course, have an unlimited capacity to influence their interaction with China, but it has more leverage than any other power. Since the early twentieth century, it has pursued two overriding objectives in the region: preventing the rise of a threatening hegemon—be it Imperial Japan, Mao’s China, or the Soviet Union—and fostering the development of a stable, cooperative international order conducive to economic growth and “free trade.” (The Washington Treaty system of the 1920s was an early and now largely ignored step toward the creation of such an order.) As long as the United States is perceived to retain the power and resolve to shape the international environment in these directions, it will likely continue to enjoy considerable support in the region.